

The last word Film studies

by the Editors

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Over the past few years it has, become increasingly apparent to us that film studies in the United States are in an uncomfortable state of flux. Since starting JUMP CUT, our contact with people all over the country has, strengthened our sense that U.S. film studies are going through the most important transition since they began and that the results will shape film studies for decades.

Partly because of popular culture's increased respectability, partly because of the pioneering work of people who fought the thankless battle to get film into the curriculum, and partly because of the "push" of students voting with their enrollment cards, film studies are increasingly becoming part of the university curriculum. At the same time, abolition of foreign language requirements and the economic pressure on humanities departments to meet enrollment rules to retain faculty positions has meant the introduction of film courses in areas such as foreign languages, English, art history, and even, we've heard, philosophy. These are areas where before they would have been scorned and often still are by those faculty members unsympathetic to film as an art form and to mass culture. But the ability of film courses to draw and enroll large numbers of undergraduates has beaten down the opposition of elitists and traditionalists, who may still scorn the goose but who love the golden eggs.

Of course there are still problems: colleges seldom have unified film programs. Film courses are usually sprinkled around rival domains: literature, art, mass communications; radio-TV, speech, theatre, interdisciplinary programs, etc. The emphasis varies widely from heavy production orientation to studying film as communication or film as humanities. But clearly the inevitable evolution of film studies is toward unified autonomous departments with degree programs—a dramatic change from only a decade ago when real degree programs in film

existed at only a few schools.

With the increasing importance of film studies, film criticism within academe is reaching a point of major change. At the moment, there are basically four tendencies in film criticism. Oldest, and most entrenched, the impressionistic school is clearly a method that has lived long past its initial value. The historical approach evolved more or less as a response to impressionism and imitated traditional literary history in an attempt at respectability. In response to both of these, a third tendency, U.S. auteurism, fought the necessary fight for a serious consideration of Hollywood but is now clearly past its prime, having played out all its options and having come up with no viable theory or methodology. (“Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude”—Sarris.) The fourth and newest tendency is that of structuralism and semiology.

Some parts of the future of film studies are clear: the historians will remain, and auteurists will increasingly become historians or flounder. The essential historical base for film studies will continue, but simultaneously newer approaches will come forward to fill the need for a critical methodology and a genuine theoretical foundation. This need has become obvious to students and younger faculty who have turned to structuralism and semiology. The logic of this move is irresistible, especially since film studies now have cheap and usable “texts” in the form of video recordings of films. Students can now work with films without the problems of limited and expensive editing table facilities or one or two screenings.

Given a text, there will be closer and more accurate readings a process which demands a comprehensive method and theory. At this point, it is a forgone conclusion that structuralism and semiology will provide that methodology. But at the same time, two serious problems accompany their introduction. First, these two approaches developed in Europe with theoretical underpinnings largely unknown or ignored here. There has been a crucial debate on first principles abroad which has not filtered through the translation barrier.

The second problem grows out of the first. Because only the tip of the structuralist/ semiotic iceberg has been translated, at present knowledge of French (and hopefully Italian) is essential to adequately discussing and using the methods and insights. We have, for the moment, the ironic situation of film studies growing from the collapse of the very foreign language requirement that provides access to the most satisfactory methodology. It must also be noted that for all of their considerable theorizing, structuralists and semiologists have produced a remarkably small body of practical film studies. Given U.S. skepticism and pragmatism, examples of the method at work will have to be forthcoming, or its advocates may find themselves smothered in reams

of their own theory, while everyone else is out watching films.

Another tendency in film studies, Marxism, is assuming increasing importance, though we don't naively think of Marxism as an inevitable victor in the contending directions of current film studies. The major reasons for the growth of Marxist criticism are easily identified. External to film studies and the universities, most obviously, is the international growth of socialism and anti-imperialist struggles. Within the United States, the end of the liberal cold war anti-communism consensus, plus the impact of the 60s progressive movements and the continuation of struggles today has put Marxism closer to the U.S. intellectual mainstream. The struggle of the U.S. working class for a better existence in the current economic situation, coupled with the ongoing efforts of blacks, women, and other oppressed minorities for an end to their specific oppression, supports the introduction of Marxist concepts. The bulk of Marxist analysis of U.S. society becomes more and more difficult to deny, even if one does not choose or even see the logical actions suggested by this analysis.

Within film studies, critics are obliged to acknowledge Marxism because it is part of the current European discourse on film. Since Marxism will become more familiar, what is the case for it? The purely internal approach to film found in varieties of formalism has reached its limits. Only a few die-hards still attempt to divorce film as art from film as mass culture. The ultimate irony of U.S. auteur criticism is that it won the battle to regard Hollywood films seriously, but it has been totally unable to deal with the major implication of popular films—the mass audience.

Marxism offers the means of transcending the limits of formalism on the one hand and simplistic sociology on the other. For a Marxist film theory sees film as a cultural object in its own right and also as existing within a system of social and historical relations. Contemporary Marxism has an astonishing diversity of views and an active controversy on questions of culture and the arts. Within this variety is a solid intellectual core of concepts that provides not the definitive methodology for film studies but the essential means for evaluating specific methodologies. Marxism also provides an understanding of how film changes and can be changed. That it, as a methodological approach, it is intentionally political.

Today the situation of film on campus is a difficult one. On the one hand, academics feel they need films to keep students in class and thus to keep their jobs. On the other hand, most academics and administrators oppose Marxism in any form and will not want to institutionalize film studies with a strong Marxist flavor. In addition, establishing a separate film department tends to draw popular, and thus populous, film courses away from other departments which have come

to count on these courses to keep them afloat. Thus, at a moment when film theory and criticism is going through a very significant transition, the nature of that change is opposed by the institution that benefits from and supports film studies. As a result, the prospect is that most advances in film theory and criticism in near future probably will not take place within U.S. film departments but will be accomplished by people who, coming to film from other disciplines, have limited access to the physical resources of a departmental film program. This will produce a fractured and uneven development of film theory in the United States. But that situation is not so bad since it will allow the emergence of alternatives before film ossifies into an academic discipline—alternatives that can keep it a live and lively subject.

Obviously we see JUMP CUT as contributing to what can only be a positive change in the serious consideration of film. It's an exciting prospect and we hope to keep sharing that excitement with you.

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